CASTE, CONFLICT, AND IDEOLOGY

MAHATMA JOTIRAO PHULE AND LOW CASTE PROTEST IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY WESTERN INDIA

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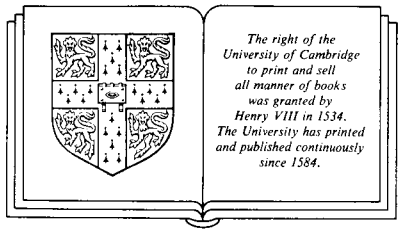

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Low caste protest in nineteenth-century western India

Jotirao Govindrao Phule was the son of an obscure lower caste family who pioneered the attack on the religious authority of Brahmans, and their predominance in the institutions of the British government and administration. He was born in Pune in the Deccan, shortly after the East India Company's assumption of power in western India, into a family of fruit-and-vegetable growers. Phule's antecedents were not such as to suggest any great aptitude in the field of ideas, or for commanding the loyalties of large numbers of men. Yet his initiative set off a broad and very active movement of the lower castes which was to have a profound effect upon the growth of political organisation in the Bombay Presidency, and the shaping of the nationalist movement towards the end of the century.

An enormous amount of scholarly effort has gone into tracing the origins and development of the varieties of nationalist movements in India and, in particular, the history of the Indian National Congress.[1] In comparison, historians have given much less attention to the organisations and ideologies which arose amongst the lower caste social groups who took no part in early nationalist politics, or who actively opposed their programmes. In part, this relative neglect has arisen from the very magnetism of the nationalist movement itself, of the personalities that led it, and of the cause that they championed with such fervour. Difficulties of evidence have also contributed. It has always been notoriously difficult to document 'popular' political or ideological activity, in societies where the great majority of the population lack even the most basic skills of literacy. The lower castes of western India are no exception to this. For the western historian, the problem is also one of language. Even when lower caste leaders were able to read and write, few of them possessed a command of fluent English, and none of them wrote substantially in English. Their use of the Marathi vernacu-

1 The most important of these for western India are Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism: Bombay and the Indian National Congress, 1880–1915*, Cambridge University Press 1973; and J. Masselos, *Towards Nationalism: Group Affiliations and the Politics of Public Associations in Nineteenth Century Western India*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay 1974.

lar was, moreover, of a rustic and unsophisticated kind that was criticised by their own higher caste contemporaries as uneducated, and that strikes even the modern Marathi reader as awkward and at times obscure. Yet our understanding of this area of South Asian history will remain a partial and distorted one until we do make a concerted attempt to understand the experience of these activists and of their followers amongst the peasant cultivators and urban lower castes of the Bombay Presidency.

The world into which Phule was born, in 1827, had just undergone a number of rapid and dramatic changes. While these reduced the liberties of all Indians in important respects, they held out the promise of new freedoms and opportunities in others. The chief of these changes was the East India Company's defeat and deposition of the peshwa, Bajirao II, in 1818. The peshwa-ship was the office of chief minister to the Maratha Rajas of Satara. The latter were the descendants of the seventeenth-century Maratha warrior hero, Shivaji Bhosale, who led the triumphant expansion of Maratha power against the Mughal rulers in Delhi and their representatives in western India. During the century after Shivaji's death in 1680, real power in the Maratha state passed out of the hands of his descendants. A number of Maratha chiefs emerged as powers in their own right, with large territories in western and central India. At the same time the peshwas increased their own power at the expense of the Rajas of Satara. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Raja Shahu II and his family were held in confinement at Satara, important only for their formal power to confer office on a new peshwa.

Since the rule of the peshwas was accompanied by a progressive fragmentation and decline of the power of the Marathas, and their ultimate defeat by the East India Company, the quality of their government, and especially that of the last peshwa, Bajirao II, has always been a sensitive issue, and remains so in Maharashtra today. It is certain, however, that western India under peshwa rule did represent, in religious terms, a relatively 'closed' society compared with that which developed under East India Company rule. Certain kinds of upward social mobility had, of course, always been possible in pre-nineteenth-century society. Individuals and whole castes could improve their position in economic terms. Such mobility would often be followed by the pursuit of higher ritual status, and castes would 'Sanskritise' their religious and social practices by assuming those appropriate to groups above them in the hierarchy.

Changes of status across the larger hierarchy into which Hindu society was divided presented a more difficult problem. The *varna*, or

category of Brahmans, stood first in this. Their ritual purity formed the basis of their office as the priests of the Hindus, while their ancient association with literacy and learning fitted them also for a range of administrative and professional occupations. At the other end of the religious hierarchy were the members of the *Shudra varna*, whose ritual impurity fitted their role as the servants and the providers of material support for the rest of society. The two intermediate *varna* categories were those of the *Kshatriya*, or warrior, and the *Vaishya*, or merchant.[2] In practice, of course, some western Indian castes who fell into the *Shudra* category occupied positions of considerable local respectability and affluence. The great proportion of agricultural castes, which included substantial landowners, were usually classed as *Shudras*. Yet this material prosperity, however widespread, did not affect more fundamental Hindu attitudes towards the *dharma*, or code of worldly conduct considered proper for *Shudras*; attitudes that were held both by Brahman religious authorities, and by the lower castes themselves. The most important of these, from the point of view of the changes that were to take place in the nineteenth century, concerned education and learning. Orthodox Hindus regarded these skills as most appropriate to the higher castes: either to Brahmans, carrying on a tradition of religious learning, or to one of the 'writer' castes, who made a living in government or commercial clerical employment. While it was no doubt possible for small numbers of the lower castes to acquire some sort of education under peshwa rule, contemporary Hindu attitudes to the education of *Shudras* made it very unlikely that facilities would ever be made available for their teaching on any large scale. In part, of course, the problem was one of finance, as well as convention. Most of the lower castes, employed as cultivators or labourers, were simply too poor to afford the luxury of education. Yet Hindu values did play a very important part in shaping opportunities for literacy and learning. Bajirao II, for example, himself a Chitpavan Brahman, distributed very generous sums of money to the large community of Brahman scholars in the city of Pune to enable them to devote their time to religious scholarship.

In practice, of course, the onset of East India Company government ushered in no sudden golden age of lower caste education. Yet it did bring some signs of widening educational opportunities. First, the collapse of the rule of the peshwas brought an end to an important function which had distinguished its government, the state's active support of Hindu religious values, by acting as the executive power of

2 The best general introduction to these religious hierarchies is in Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, The Free Press, New York 1958, pp. 55–100.

Brahman religious authorities.[3] The severing of this connection, and the change in the attitude of the state which it implied, gave ground to hope for the provision of schools and colleges to which all would have equal access. This hope was realised, not so much by the East India Company, but in the burgeoning of educational establishments of all kinds in the hands of the protestant missionaries. The missionaries saw in the lower and untouchable castes a most fertile ground for proselytisation. They did their utmost to persuade their audiences that the Hindu religion had deprived them, as *Shudras*, of their real rights in matters of education and religion. For men like Jotirao Phule who attended these schools, the onset of Company rule indeed appeared to bring new opportunities for their own advancement, and for a more fundamental change in attitudes towards their status as *Shudras*.

At the same time that this change of government raised such hopes, new clouds appeared to darken the horizon of those seeking far-reaching social change. As the Company's political and administrative institutions grew in size and extended more deeply into Indian society, it became clear that they offered great possibilities, both of emolument and of influence, to those Indians able to find employment in them. Most importantly, they would gain a strategic mediatory position between the Company's government and the larger masses of western Indian society. This dimension of control in administrative institutions – from local educational establishments to the conduct of rent and remission assessments, and even the ability to influence simple administrative procedures in the local courts – impinged forcibly upon local society.

Other, more obviously 'political', kinds of power awaited those Indians who from the mid-century were able to respond to the growth of British institutions with organisations of their own that were directed at engaging and influencing those of the British government. In western India, these efforts culminated in the formation of public associations such as the Pune Sarvajanik Sabha, formed in 1870; at the all-India level, of course, they reached fruition in the Indian National Congress. In addition to the opportunities that they gained for influencing short-term British policy, these early political organisations were very well placed to play some part in shaping the future development of India's political institutions. When, from the 1870s, limited ideas of a devolution of power to Indians themselves became current, such

3 For a description of this role, see Hiroshi Fukazawa, 'State and Caste System (Jati) in the Eighteenth Century Maratha Kingdom', *Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics*, vol. 9, no. 1, June 1968.

influence took on an even greater significance. This was apparent to no one more than to radical leaders of the lower castes.

These new opportunities for administrative and political power required very similar skills from those who wished to exploit either of them. Above all, these skills consisted of a high degree of literacy; a command of fluent English; a familiarity with new administrative procedures, experience of urban as well as rural, British as well as Indian society; and, for preference, some kind of professional qualification. It was here that older attitudes about education influenced the ability of different groups to respond to these opportunities. The old association of the higher castes with the skills of literacy gave them a much greater flexibility and readiness to exploit these new possibilities than was possessed by any of western India's agricultural or urban lower castes. The result of this disparity was that the higher castes, and Brahmans in particular, came to occupy a proportion of clerical and professional positions at all levels of the British administration that was far in excess of their numerical proportions in the population as a whole.[4]

It was here that lower caste leaders perceived their caste-fellows to be so acutely disadvantaged. Far from breaking down inequalities within western Indian society, British rule looked as though it might reinforce them by adding to the older religious authority of Brahmans a formidable new range of administrative and political powers. In an assumption typical of such radical and 'oppositional' movements, moreover, men like Phule were convinced of some kind of deliberate collusion or conspiracy between the different interests that conflicted with their own. They argued that Brahmans in different spheres of politics and religion would naturally combine to protect their advantages, and to reinforce their powers over the lower castes. In their efforts, Brahmans would find the conservative attitudes of these castes themselves to be their greatest ally. Phule and his colleagues drew from this the conclusion that a rejection of Brahman religious authority, and of the hierarchical values on which it was based, formed the precondition for any real change in their condition. They also hoped for a long

4 See, for example, Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press 1968. A revealing set of figures given by Seal for the year 1886–7, that of the caste of persons employed in the executive and judicial branches of the Uncovenanted Service in the Bombay Presidency – the elite of the Indian administrative hierarchy – shows that of the 384 persons employed in this capacity, 328 were Hindus, of which 211 were Brahmans, 26 *Kshatriyas*, 37 *Prabhus*, 38 *Vaishyas* or *Banias*, 1 *Shudra*, and 15 others. The categories used here confuse the *jati* with the *varna* grouping and are no doubt very crude, but the figures do give an indication of the relative proportion of Brahmans to *Shudras*, the category with which Phule would have been concerned. Seal, p. 118.

period of benevolent paternal rule by the British while the lower castes developed the skills and social resources that they had failed to acquire in pre-nineteenth-century society.

The deep religious conservatism of these same groups presented one of the main obstacles to this ambitious programme of reform. It was in meeting this challenge, and in establishing an ideological basis for a revolution in social and religious values, that Phule and his fellow radicals displayed their greatest talents. In a brilliant effort of creativity and imagination, they projected a new collective identity for all Maharashtra's lower castes. In their 'discovery' of this identity, which lay obscured by the fictions in Hindu representations of the proper ordering of society, they drew on existing symbols from Maharashtra's warrior and agricultural traditions, and gave them a powerful new meaning. In this manipulation of symbols, religious rituals, and conflicts, and other elements in popular culture, lower caste radicals displayed a highly sophisticated understanding of the process of identity formation. This gives their efforts an absorbing interest for historians and anthropologists alike.

The popular movements that resulted from their efforts influenced the very structure of politics and political debate in the Bombay Presidency. First, their attempts to appropriate important symbols in popular culture created a much wider consciousness of the possible 'meanings' that might be attached to Maharashtra's history and traditions, and sparked off an intense debate as polemicists of all shades of political opinion advanced their competing interpretations. This debate was much less 'visible' than those over the more immediate issues of British rule, but the stakes were of equal, if not greater, importance. At issue was the control of the symbols that would give Indian politicians their eagerly sought access to social and religious loyalties already in existence amongst the masses of Hindus themselves. Secondly, these movements of non-Brahmans deprived the emerging nationalist movement in western India both of a considerable body of support, and of the considerable ideological advantages that nationalists would have gained in their arguments with the British government from a monopoly of Maharashtra's symbolic resources.

In this way, the study of lower caste movements and ideologies helps to turn our attention to that much neglected area of Indian politics in the nineteenth century: the tensions and rivalries between social groups within Indian society. These movements also present a number of other important questions that may have relevance for other areas of South Asian history. The first is whether non-Brahman ideology developed out of real caste antagonism within Indian society and, if so, how far

this hostility was already present within western Indian society, and how far it was the product of conditions created by British rule. Clearly associated with this problem is the question of whether non-Brahman ideologues and activists formed an elite that was in some sense separate from the interest groups which they claimed to represent. If this was so, it becomes necessary to ask if their activity can be distinguished in any real way from that of other elites, or whether, indeed, all such political conflict represented an expression of factional fighting between elite groups, each of whom claimed to represent the 'real' opinions and interests of the people of Maharashtra. The last question concerns the status of non-Brahman ideas as ideology. This raises the perennial problem of political and other ideologies: whether we are to understand them as a veneer put upon more practical material interests, or whether we should accept them in some sense as carrying genuine affect and commitment for those who held them at the same time as they embodied what their protagonists thought to be some vital interest or need.

With a few exceptions, scholarly interest in non-Brahman movements and ideologies has grown up relatively recently, and has focused primarily upon conflicts between Brahmans and other castes in the Madras and Bombay Presidencies. For the former, we have Eugene Irschick's work, [5] and that by Marguerite Ross Barnett on the politics and ideology of Tamil nationalism.[6] For the Bombay Presidency, Gail Omvedt's work on the non-Brahman movement between 1873 and 1930 has been of great value in opening up a very large new field for western scholars, and bringing their attention to an important and neglected section of Maharashtrian society.[7] This study owes a great deal to the basic lineaments of non-Brahman political and ideological activity set out in this work. In recent years, interest has also grown in movements that were often associated with, or were offshoots from, non-Brahman ideologies – those amongst untouchable castes in the different provinces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What usually distinguished these movements was their perception of all caste Hindus, rather than merely Brahmans, as the supporters of the oppressive hierarchies of caste. Poineering work here has been done by Eleanor

5 Eugene Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916–1929*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1969.

6 Marguerite Ross Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton University Press 1976.

7 Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India: 1873 to 1930*, Scientific Socialist Education Trust, Bombay 1976.

Zelliot for the Bombay Presidency,[8] and by Mark Juergensmeyer for the Punjab.[9]

The present study shares much in common with these and the information and interpretations which they have provided have been invaluable. It also has its own different emphasis. This derives from what I have felt to be a basic and primary need in the study of non-Brahman ideology and politics which is not always met in existing secondary works. This is to explore in detail the actual content of ideology, the ideas and arguments that non-Brahmans themselves put forward to rally popular support to their belief in the oppressiveness of Brahmanic religious values, and the evil effects of the latter upon the lower castes in the nineteenth century. This study is based on the assumption that we can learn much more about the real origins of non-Brahman politics and ideology, and the social context which shaped them, by examining the actual content of non-Brahman ideas, and preferably from their Marathi sources, than by passing straight to a ready-made set of political and economic interests supposed to have been the 'real' force behind them. Such interests themselves cannot be properly understood outside the ideological context in which they are articulated. The main part of this study is therefore devoted to a detailed exposition of the ideas and arguments of the first leader and most influential theoretician of the movement of lower caste protest in nineteenth-century Maharashtra, Mahatma Jotirao Phule. These are first set within their broader social context and shown in their relationship to the new conditions imposed by British rule.

One further point should be clarified here. This concerns the arguments that will be used here about the 'origins' of new ideologies such as those that informed the work of Phule and his colleagues. To talk about the 'origins' of an idea or movement is to talk about both the conditions which caused them and those which gave them their peculiar shape or means of expression. For the former, it is necessary to take into account not only what their protagonists themselves say prompted them to action, but also motives which they may have concealed deliberately, and larger social forces of which they may not have been aware. In explaining the first of these, it may be possible in some cases to say that what they said was true – that the external conditions cited as the cause did actually exist. This would, of course, still leave us with

8 Eleanor Zelliot, 'Learning the Use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra' in Rajni Kothari (ed.), *Caste in Indian Politics*, Orient Longman, New Delhi 1970; and 'Religion and Legitimation in the Mahar Movement', in Bardwell Smith (ed.), *Religion and Legitimation in South Asia*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1978.

9 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement Against Untouchability in 20th-Century Punjab*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1982.

the much more difficult task of understanding how these objective conditions were incorporated into a larger ideological scheme, and why these, and not others, should suddenly have assumed a new importance. This bears upon our understanding of the origins of Phule's ideas. His argument about Brahmans in the British administration formed the basis of many of his other ideas about the nature of Brahman power: that Brahmans used their secular powers to protect the orthodox religious values with which they identified, or to aggrandise their own personal positions in some more material way. What I would like to argue here is that the second and third statements here require a different kind of explanation from the first. Phule's contention about the proportions of Brahmans in the British administration in the period in which he wrote does have a clearly identifiable basis in objective reality. The second and third statements might well have had some objective basis, but this is by no means obvious and, as clearly polemical statements, they are better understood in the quite different context of Phule's belief in the conspiratorial nature of all Brahman activities.

We turn now to examine the area of social structure from which Phule's movement arose.